

CPC Futures

*The New Era of
Socialism with
Chinese Characteristics*

Frank N. Pieke and
Bert Hofman, editors



8

Democracy with Chinese Adjectives: Whole-process Democracy and China’s Political Development

Wang Zhongyuan

Since the 1990s, new views and forms of democracy have emerged. A number of countries have redefined democracy in ways that differ from Western multi-party democracy. Political scientists have used various adjectives to capture the characteristics of these new forms of democratic politics. Some notable examples are “authoritarian democracy”, “illiberal democracy” and “neo-patrimonial democracy” (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

The People’s Republic of China is one of these countries. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has always included democracy as part of its governing system, insisting on the essential difference and superiority of its own concept of “socialist democracy”. Very recently, the CPC has taken a further step, formulating a new and distinctive conception of democracy, the “whole-process people’s democracy”. Three adjectives, *whole*, *process* and *people’s*, are thus put together in front of democracy, in a new effort to frame an alternative brand of democracy to counter the hegemony of Western liberal democracy and to blaze the CPC’s own trail.

Rise of a new narrative

The development and propagation of whole-process democracy have taken place in three stages. The first stage was distilling a new concept from existing practices. On 2 November 2019 when inspecting the grassroots consultative centre of the National People’s Congress in Shanghai, President Xi Jinping remarked for the

first time that “China’s people’s democracy is a type of whole-process democracy” in which all legislation is made “after going through procedures and democratic deliberations to ensure that decision-making is sound and democratic”.

Whether prepared in advance or not, at this initial stage whole-process democracy (i.e. still without the further qualifier of “people’s”) may just seem to amount to old wine in new bottles, just a call for developing socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics in the Xi era. However, the new term also serves to describe the experiments with democratic elements in the legislative process and local-governance activities. It seeks to boost confidence by acknowledging the many unique democratic processes at play in China, and that these can deliver better outcomes for the people.

During the second stage, whole-process democracy was formally made part of China’s system of governance. At its annual plenary session in March 2021, the Chinese National Congress (NPC) voted to pass the *Decision on Amending the Organic Law of the NPC*, which included the phrase “adherence to whole-process democracy” (Xinhua 2021). As a relatively weak and marginalised institution, the NPC capitalised on the new idea of whole-process democracy as an area in which it can try to make a difference, the perfect opportunity to show its contribution to the consolidation of the rule of the Party. Spearheading a nationwide campaign for promoting whole-process democracy, the NPC and local people’s congresses at all levels prominently promoted the new concept.

Subsequently, whole-process democracy was incorporated into the Party’s ideology as an improved model of socialist democracy for the 21st century. The Party took over the job from the NPC by presenting further interpretations of the term and constructing a more comprehensive narrative on that basis. Xi Jinping then took a further step. On 1 July 2021, on the significant occasion of his speech at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC, Xi called for the Party to “develop whole-process people’s democracy”, thus adding the word “people’s” to the term (we continue to use “whole-process democracy” for short in this chapter). Significantly, he did so in the context both of his promotion of social fairness and of his other ideological innovation of 2021, “common prosperity” (see the chapter written by Bert Hofman in this volume) (Xi 2021).

Party organs and theorists have lost little time seizing the momentum, further incorporating the new concept into the Party’s ruling ideology and promoting the new narrative nation-wide. The emphasis on “people” is driven by the re-emphasis on the Party’s Maoist mass-line tradition and Xi’s own “people-centred” approach, thereby underscoring both the legitimate foundations of the new concept and the Party’s influence on the nature of democracy.

The third stage is about propagandising the new discourse to international audiences, in ways that seem not to have been thought through very well. In December 2021, China issued a white paper called *China: Democracy That Works* (State Council of the PRC 2021). It was published just days before the “Summit for Democracy” convened by the United States on 10 and 11 December 2021 to which China had not been invited and which Beijing condemned as the “Anti-Chinese International” (Tavrovsky 2021). The white paper was followed by an organised flurry of articles discrediting American-style democracy¹ and a joint statement on a democratic alliance with like-minded Russia.²

Democracy itself, so it seems, has been turned into an ideological weapon of hegemonic contestation. In the beginning, whole-process democracy was put forward mainly for domestic aims, either as a means to encourage innovative practices and rally self-confidence in China’s own path, or as a new legitimisation strategy to compensate for economic slowdown. As it is being increasingly rebuked for its lack of democracy, the party regime picked up this newly-coined ideological weapon and pushed for a tougher tone by launching a massive global propaganda campaign.

Overall, the rise of whole-process democracy makes full use of theoretical possibilities in political science, both the richness of democratic concepts and the diversity of democratic models. We should not ignore the fact that there is no shortage of politics scholars among China’s top advisors who are familiar with the democracy literature and are able to make theoretically sophisticated ideological arguments.

However, whole-process democracy has also caught on to the latest political dynamics at home and abroad. Domestically, local governance innovations, achievements in poverty alleviation, success in handling the coronavirus, and technological progress have all been held up as evidence of the superiority of the Chinese political system. Internationally, dysfunction in crisis management, socioeconomic turmoil, electoral conflicts and political polarisation are presented as evidence for the demise of Western democracy. As China rises on all fronts, it is steadily emboldened to challenge the Western monopoly of democratic discourse.

Democracy “Made in China”

The recent campaign promoting whole-process democracy is not completely new, but amounts to an upgraded extension of a strategy that started decades ago. The Tiananmen Incident in 1989 left the Chinese system vulnerable to democracy critics within and outside of China, pushing the country to avoid

talking about democracy while focusing only on securing economic growth. It was not until the beginning of the new millennium that the leadership in Beijing recognised the need to win the understanding of its political system of the outside world. This led to the recrafting of socialist democracy. Research institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences were tasked to deepen relevant research, based on which in 2005 the State Council issued the first white paper on democracy in the history of the People's Republic of China (Information Office 2005).

Back then, “socialist democracy” served mainly as a bridge narrowing the distance between China and the West at a time when Sino-Western relations were in their honeymoon period. This move was to show the rest of the world that China had made remarkable progress in political development along with its rapid economic growth. Beijing was eager to convince the West that it was still cherishing the value of democracy and was open to exchanging ideas, albeit insisting on its own characteristics.

By explaining its democratic traditions and institutions, the leadership at the time aimed to help the world better understand China's recent political development and thus increase mutual trust. China was no longer ashamed to talk about democracy; instead, it showcased democracy to garner domestic support and international sympathy.

The 2005 White Paper defined socialist democracy as a three-in-one model, that is, “a combination of the Party's leadership, the rule of law, and the people's democracy”. For Chinese leaders, these three seemingly contractionary elements actually go well together. The rule of law and people's democracy require the leadership and guidance of the Party, while the realisation of the rule of law and people's democracy in return consolidate the Party's ruling power.

In practice, however, the three did not proceed so smoothly together. The people's democracy first gained momentum in the 1990s and early 2000s when rural elections and local congressional elections were in full swing, and some localities even experimented with township elections. However, with the need for maintenance of social stability appearing on the political agenda in 2007 and the outbreak of colour revolutions overseas in the first years of the twenty-first century and again with the Arab Spring in 2011, the CPC felt the urgent need to re-bolster its leadership. Since then, China has begun to promote “mobilised representation” and “good governance” vigorously while downplaying competitive local elections, justifying its political system through output legitimacy instead of input legitimacy (Wang 2020).

The rise of whole-process democracy continues this trend, but far more aggressively and ambitiously. In comparison with earlier CPC approaches to democracy, the new concept made four key changes:

1. Democracy's "Chinese characteristics" are further defined. The emphasis on "whole-process" seeks to distinguish it from the procedural tradition of liberal democracy, criticising the latter for its focus on short-term electoral processes and arguing that only Chinese democracy "works" for the people.
2. China lays out its own standards for evaluating democracy. Xi put forward a long list of criteria. The most important one is that democracy should "solve the people's real problems"³ (i.e. primarily consequentialist). A democracy where "the people are awakened only for voting" is not a true democracy.
3. No longer performing as a bridge that seeks mutual understanding, Chinese democracy nowadays serves as both a spear and a shield. As a shield, it serves to protect the party regime from Western accusations. As a spear, it can be weaponised to attack liberal democracy. The Party claims that whole-process democracy is "more extensive, more genuine and more effective" than American democracy (*Global Times* 2021).
4. With whole-process democracy, China is building its own system of discourse and allies. By gaining a foothold in the democracy arena, China can not only fend off ideological threats to the stability of its regime, but also become more able to unify anti-Western forces and promote its political values internationally. This plays into China's larger ambitions to build its global leadership and discursive power.

The December 2021 White Paper *China: A Democracy that Works* is on this point quite different from its predecessor in 2005. The superiority and virtues of China's political system are repeatedly emphasised to demonstrate its "institutional self-confidence". Moreover, China's instrumentalisation of democracy is evolving with its growing power and the international status it believes it deserves.

Expanded Audience

Whole-process democracy targets at least four audiences. First, the new concept immediately attracted the attention of bureaucrats at all levels of administration. After receiving the signal from the leadership, they are trying to experiment with various innovations (such as community deliberations) in their own domain in the name of whole-process democracy or label their work as part of whole-process democracy, as we have already seen in the case of the people's congress system.

The second audience is academia. Like policy entrepreneurs, many pundits will seize on this new concept, leaving no stone unturned to help government interpret and justify it in scholarly terms. However, some liberal-minded scholars and political activists may still try to take advantage of this concept to push for meaningful democratic reforms on the ground, such as rejuvenating local elections.

The third audience is domestic citizens. The real challenge of whole-process democracy lies in turning the discourse into tangible added gains for the people, both materially and institutionally. Overclaiming could always expose the government to risk, especially when a new initiative fails to meet the standards it has put forward itself.

The fourth group is foreign audiences. This is the first time that China is portraying and promoting its democracy in such a high-profile way. Yet a balance must be struck between aggressively boosting China's discourse power and winning the hearts of foreign audiences more gently. Otherwise, having any impact internationally will be extremely difficult.

Some Pitfalls

Whole-process democracy also comes with some worrying pitfalls that the party regime must avoid. First, championing whole-process democracy only tends to make democracy more "whole-process" rather than simultaneously making the whole process more democratic. It may encourage local authorities to downplay elections or even give up elections if necessary.

Second, many argue that whole-process democracy has already been achieved in China and it is not to be considered as a goal for future political development. Thus celebrating it too much fails to recognise various problems and challenges the country is facing.

Third, the high-profile propaganda on whole-process democracy may lead China to wallow in blind self-confidence. Being excessively assertive and offensive could potentially cause misunderstandings and distrust abroad.

Fourth, democracy may be reduced to a discursive weapon for global power competition. For China, this could result in further isolation and confrontation. For democracy, all that remains in the end might just be an empty shell.

It might therefore be better for the rest of world to "let the bullets fly for a while" and give China time and opportunity to explore and demonstrate different democratic possibilities, rather than taking the bait and asserting the superiority of its own democracies at every opportunity.

Notes

¹ For instance, Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China (RDCY), “Ten Questions for American Democracy”, 6 December 2021; available at <http://download.people.com.cn/waiwen/eight16388399461.pdf> (accessed 5 June 2022); Waijiao bu 外交部 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. *Meiguo minzhu qingkuang* 美国民主情况 [On American Democracy], 5 December 2021; available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/202112/t20211205_10462534.shtml (accessed 10 May 2022).

² The joint statement between China and Russia was made when Vladimir Putin visited China to attend the opening ceremony of the 24th Winter Olympics in Beijing: *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he eluosi lianbang guanyu xin shidai guoji guanxi he quanqiu kechixu fazhanda lianhe shengming* 中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于新时代国际关系和全球可持续发展的联合声明 (全文) [Joint statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the sustainable development of international relations and globalization in the new era (full text)], 4 February 2022; available at http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-02/04/content_5672025.htm (accessed 10 May 2022).

³ For a Chinese collection of Xi Jinping’s comments on standards for evaluating democracy, see http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/2021-10/15/c_1127962266.htm (accessed 12 May 2022).

References

- Collier, David and Steven Levitsky. 1997. “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research”, *World Politics* 49, 3: 430–51. doi:10.1353/wp.1997.0009.
- Global Times*. 2021. “China’s Democracy ‘More Extensive, Genuine and Effective’ than US Democracy”, 4 Dec. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1240628.shtml> (accessed 6 August 2022).
- Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. 2005. *Building of Political Democracy in China*. Available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/145877.htm> (accessed 5 June 2022).
- State Council of the People’s Republic of China. 2021. “China Issues White Paper on its Democracy”, 4 Dec. Available at http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202112/04/content_WS61aae34fc6d0df57f98e6098.html (accessed 10 May 2022).
- Tavrovsky, Yury. 2021. “Slim Chance for US to Form an ‘Anti-Chinese International’ with Summit for Democracy”, *Global Times*, 30 Nov. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1240327.shtml> (accessed 10 May 2022).
- Wang Zhongyuan. 2020. *Remodeling Democracy: Managed Elections and Mobilized Representation in Chinese Local Congresses*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

- Xi Jinping. 2021. "Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC", 1 Jul. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm (accessed 4 August 2022).
- Xinhua. 2021. "China Focus: China Amends Laws to Highlight 'Whole-process Democracy'", 11 Mar. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/11/c_139802500.htm (accessed 4 August 2022).